

Violent video games not so bad when players cooperate

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(Phys.org)—New research suggests that violent video games may not make players more aggressive – if they play cooperatively with other people. In two studies, researchers found that college students who teamed up to play violent video games later showed more cooperative behavior, and sometimes less signs of aggression, than students who played the games competitively.

The results suggest that it is too simplistic to say violent video games are always bad for players, said David Ewoldsen, co-author of the studies and professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"Clearly, research has established there are links between playing violent video games and aggression, but that's an incomplete picture," Ewoldsen said.

"Most of the studies finding links between [violent games](#) and aggression were done with people playing alone. The [social aspect](#) of today's video games can change things quite a bit."

The new research suggests playing a violent game with a teammate changes how people react to the violence.

"You're still being very aggressive, you're still killing people in the game – but when you cooperate, that overrides any of the negative effects of the extreme aggression," said co-author John Velez, a graduate student in communication at Ohio State.

One study was recently published online in the journal [Communication Research](#), and will appear in a future print edition. The second related study was published recently in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

The CBSN study involved 119 college students who were placed into four groups to play the violent [video game](#) Halo II with a partner. The groups differed in whether they competed or cooperated in playing the game.

First, all participants filled out a survey about their video game history and a measure of their [aggressiveness](#).

Those in direct competition played in multiplayer mode and were told that their task was to kill their opponent more times than they were killed.

Those in indirect competition played in single-player mode, but were told their task was to beat their opponent by getting further in the game.

In the cooperative condition, participants were told to get as far as they could through the game by working with their partner in Halo II's cooperative campaign mode. In this case, the pair worked together to defeat computer-controlled enemies.

The final group simply filled out the measures and played the game at the end of the study. Their game playing was not recorded.

After playing the violent video game, the same pairs of participants who played with or against each other took part in a real-life game where they had the opportunity to cooperate or compete with each other.

In this game, they played multiple rounds where they were given dimes

which they could keep or share with their partner. The researchers were looking to see if they engaged in "tit for tat" behavior, in which the players mirrored the behaviors of their partner. In other words, if your partner acts cooperatively towards you, you do the same for him. Tit for tat behavior is seen by researchers as a precursor to cooperation.

The results showed that participants who played the video game cooperatively were more likely than those who competed to show cooperative tendencies in this later real-life game.

"These findings suggest video game research needs to consider not only the content of the game but also how video game players are playing the game," Velez said.

The second study, published in *Communication Research*, extended the findings by showing that cooperating in playing a violent video game can even unite people from rival groups – in this case, fans of Ohio State and those of their bitter rival, the University of Michigan.

This study involved 80 Ohio State students who, when they came to the lab for the experiment, were paired with a person who they thought was another student participant. In fact, it was one of the experimenters who was wearing an Ohio State t-shirt – or one from the rival University of Michigan.

One of the researchers made sure to point out the t-shirt to the student participant.

The student and confederate then played the highly realistic and violent first-person-shooter video game *Unreal Tournament III* together – either as teammates or as rivals.

After playing the video game, the participants played the same real-life

game used in the previous study with their supposed partner, who was really one of the researchers.

They also completed tasks that measured how aggressive they felt, and their aggressive tendencies.

The results showed the power of cooperatively playing violent video games in reducing aggressive thoughts – and even overcoming group differences.

As in the first study, players who cooperated in playing the video game later showed more cooperation than did those who competed against each other.

It even worked when Ohio State participants thought they were playing with a rival from the University of Michigan.

"The cooperative play just wiped out any effect of who you were playing with," Velez said. "Ohio State students happily cooperated with Michigan fans."

Also, those participants who played cooperatively showed less aggressive tendencies afterwards than those who played competitively, at least at first. In fact, those who played competitively with a rival actually showed less aggression than those who played with a supporter of their own team.

"If you're playing with a rival, and that rival is cooperating with you, that violates your expectations – you're surprised by their cooperation and that makes you even more willing to cooperate," Ewoldsen said.

Eventually, even those who competed with each other in the video games started cooperating with each other in the real-life games afterwards.

"The point is that the way you act in the real world very quickly overrides anything that is going on in the video games," Ewoldsen said. "Video games aren't controlling who we are."

These results should encourage researchers to study not only how the content of [violent video games](#) affects players, but also how the style of play has an impact.

"What is more important: cooperating with another human being, or killing a digital creature?" Ewoldsen said.

"We think that cooperating with another human overrides the effects of playing a [violent video](#) game."

Provided by Ohio State University

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